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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf's "Orlando" is an excellent example of mock biography to use in literature classes concerned with analyzing literary genres. Woolf used humor to undermine some conventions of the genre of biography and to reform biography into a shape adequate to express the life of Vita Sackville-West. An ordinary biography most likely would have to position Vita as man or woman, tragic or comic. Woolf's mock biography, however, more uncertain than it is certain, more hyperbolic than it is realistic, is the story of a man/woman's four hundred years full of gender changes, cross-dressing, lovers of both sexes, and a court case to determine her sex. It tells broad diverse tragi-comic truths about Vita that more ordinary biography might have been incapable of embracing. (RS)

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Robin Hackett

Humor As A Weapon In Virginia Woolf's Orlando

I'm going to talk about Virginia Woolf's use of humor in her mock-biography Orlando to undermine some conventions of the genre biography and to reform biography into a shape adequate to express the life of Vita Sackville-West. This first quote is from the scene in which Orlando, having lived 300 or so of her 400 years, and changed into a woman, is being plagued by a suitor. She insults him by cheating at a game and tossing a toad down his pants. She finishes him off by laughing.

> In justice to [Orlando] it must be said that she would infinitely have preferred a rapier. . . . But if rapiers are forbidden, one must have recourse to toads. Moreover toads and laughter between them sometimes do what cold steel cannot. She laughed. The Archduke blushed. She laughed. The Archduke cursed. She laughed. The Archduke slammed the door.
>
> `Heaven be praised!' cried Orlando still laughing. (Orlando 120)

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In this fragment Virginia Woolf's character adeptly brandishes her weapon, laughter. It proves as effective as a rapier in getting rid of an unwanted suitor and has the advantage of being accessible to Orlando, who, in her most recent embodiment as a Victorian noble woman, is bound by convention not to draw blood. Woolf's staccato phrasing of the passage hardens the point of Orlando's hilarity: with each jabbing "[s]he laughed" the archduke retreats further, finally slamming the door after the third and final stab at his masculine pride. In Orlando's hands, laughter is ironically both phallic and castrating.

That Woolf gave Orlando laughter and a toad when she needed

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a weapon is parallel to the author's own project. With the humor in Orlando, Woolf cuts gaping holes in the concept of gender as one, discrete, of two options. She proves mandates against homosexuality ridiculous. And she severs the link between truth and biography, which is what I will talk about today. Woolf's humor does not, however, simply destroy. It takes apart some of the conventions of traditional biography, but it also creates a kind of biography capable of telling truths about Vita Sackville-West, whose cross-dressing and lesbianism were legally unspeakable; were likely, we know from the successful case against Radcliffe Hall's Well of Loneliness, to get a work banned for obscenity. If for no other reason than that Orlando was not banned, Vita's life is more successfully and, perhaps, more adequately expressed through Woolf's carnivalesque absurdity, hyperbole, and "mere suggestion" (Orlando ) than it is by traditional biography's more usual factual progression from one concrete, causal, detail to another.

In Permanence and Change, Kenneth Burke's analysis of human motives and social transformation, Burke uses the word piety to describe the verbal linkages that reaffirm our perceptions of the world. Not necessarily a religious concept to Burke, piety is "loyalty to the sources of our beings" (71), and "the sense of what properly goes with what" (74) often carried with us from childhood. Burke describes a "gashouse gang" as pious in the "earnestness" with which members conform to "the correct way of commenting upon passing women," and "the etiquette of spitting" (77). "Where you discern the symptoms of great devotion to any

kind of endeavor," Burke says "you are in the realm of piety" (83).

Impiety, on the other hand, includes attempts to "reorganize one's orientations from the past" (80). Burke explains:

> Suppose, I . . . noted a connection between English diplomacy and the philosophy of muddling through. To muddle through is not to be over-exact, to let events shape themselves in part, to make up one's specific policies as one goes along, in accordance with the unforeseen newnesses that occur in the course of events, instead of approaching one's problem with an entire program laid out rigidly in advance. Is not this the ideal equipment of the diplomat?
>
> Yet as soon as one attempts conversions of this sort, one faces the violation of linguistic and conceptual categories already established. (108)

The violations Burke describes rip diplomacy and muddling through from the categories to which our moral judgements ascribe them: diplomacy belongs among good strategies; muddling through belongs, at best, among haplessly competent ones. Writers necessarily start with "group weightings" of words, as Burke calls these established judgements; writers start with pious linkages, but can alter those linkages, classify impiously, and create incongruities which reflect their specific re-vision. By thus violating pieties, if they take readers along "a properly ordered series of steps" according to Burke, (Burke liii), writers can change language, and thus reality and behavior.

Burke lends humor a significance it does not always have by going on to say that humorists, satirists, and writers of the grotesque are those who most commonly use perspective by incongruity. By deliberately mis-fitting terms, humorists reveal their insights, thus revising the way we understand words, at least within the context of their work. Potentially they revise

the way we use language ourselves and the realities that our language creates (91).

Woolf's Orlando lives up to Burke's assessment of the subversive potential of a work of humor. Woolf's violation of pieties surrounding biography cause us first to notice, and then to chuckle at, thus undermining, the conventions of the genre. From the beginning, for instance, Woolf explodes the convention that a biographer is an invisible scribe. Very shortly after the biographer introduces Orlando, on the second page of the book, Woolf has the biographer introduce himself (he is, comically, a generic he at this point): [Happy] the biographer who records the life of such a one [as Orlando]! Never need . . . he invoke the help of novelist or poet" (8).

These lines do two things. First, they make us acknowledge the biographer telling Orlando's story. We realize we will read as much about the biographer (what makes him happy or sad) as we do about Orlando. Second, the lines take apart the distinction between biography and fiction. Woolf conspicuously claims what most biographers silently encourage readers to assume: our biographer has no need to create any part of the narrative to follow. By insisting on what we would ordinarily assume, Woolf makes us aware of our assumption that all biographers are truth-tellers not creators. And she suggests sarcastically that only biographers like ours, happy ones with cooperative histories to relate, can be truth-tellers, "scribe[s] following after" (8) from deed to deed, glory to glory. Woolf's humor is double-edged. We laugh at the unusual presence of the biographer and at

the idea that he is made happy and sad by qualities of his subject. And we also end up laughing at the notion (Woolf has shown it as absurd) that biographers could ever be mere scribes. Nobody's personal history could be that cooperative.

One page later, Woolf topples even her biographer from the rank of truth-teller, reiterating what we have already been teased into observing by her sarcasm: biography and truth are linked by convention only. Woolf writes, "we" (the biographer is plural now) "have to admit a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore" (9). Even Orlando's biographer, she concedes, is an unhappy one, one who will invoke the help of the novelist. This line also impiously describes one who ignores details as "good." Ignoring details is usually a negative attribute particularly when applied to a scholar. From what strange perspective, we wonder, is a good biographer one who ignores details?

Woolf answers this question on the next page, again making us laugh at our absurd notions. She writes: "`I am alone,' he [Orlando] breathed at last, opening his lips for the first time in this record." The incongruity in this line is jarring. On one hand, the biographer claims for Orlando status as historic record, and not novel. On the other hand, she/he brings bluntly to our attention the idea that this record is an artifice in the same way that a novel is. The biographer does not claim to report the first time Orlando ever opened his lips; she/he does not claim to report his birth date, his birth place, or his parentage. She/he claims to chronicle nothing relative to

anything except to "this record." The important events in the record are the important events in the record, not necessarily important events in Orlando's life. A good biographer, Woolf states, is one who ignores details not important to the record. A good biographer has loyalty only to his creation.

Woolf thus destroys the distinction between biography and fiction. She claims, as Burke does, that invisible transmission of pure idea is not a possible form of communication (Burke intro). Woolf goes one step farther. She also rejects the idea that invisible transmission would be desirable even if it <u>were</u> possible. "Good biography" ignores all detail but that important to the record. By impiously exposing the usually invisible conventions of biography, Woolf makes us chuckle and she explodes our reverence for truth in biography. The link between good and true gives way and we become incapable of perceiving biography as we previously have.

As she rearranges our conception of biography by disrupting linkages between true and good, Woolf also rearranges our conception of what a reader is by disrupting linkages between writer/expert, and reader/passive observer. First Woolf tells us, through her biographer, what kind of reader she writes for:

> . . .those who [do] a reader's part in making up from bare hints dropped here and there the whole boundary and circumference of a living person; can hear in what we only whisper a living voice; can see, often when we say nothing about it, exactly what he looked like, and know without a word to guide them precisely what he thought and felt . . . it is for readers such as these alone that we write. . . (47)

Here Woolf's exaggerations are comic. We laugh at her expectations of us; we cannot spin straw into gold and we don't

expect of ourselves such a feat. Even as we laugh at Woolf's expectations, however, we see reflected back at us, absurdly now, our expectations of a writer. Experts, we have assumed, tell us the whole story, reflect an entire person or event when they drop us a bare hint, or give us empty space. Mid-chuckle, the object of our mirth switches from Woolf's expectations to ours, from absurd conception of reader to absurd conception of writer until a definition of neither is fixed in our minds.

Woolf also equates biographer with reader by her frequent use of "perhaps." By my count, the word appears 50 times in Orlando--this in addition to numerous occurrences of "doubt," "may have been," "it is probable that," and "according to historians." More like a reader than a writer, the biographer does not present certainties. She/he observes a situation and suggests explanations. This is what Woolf has said a reader must do--make up the full boundaries of a person by a whisper, a hint dropped here or there. The biographer is a reader of a life, who then reports to another reader what she/he has read.

The most convincing and comic example of Woolf transposing biographer, or writer, and reader is during chapter 3, in which the biographer exaggeratedly mourns a lack of records on which to base his/her narrative. "It is, indeed," s/he says "highly unfortunate, and much to be regretted that at this stage of Orlando's career, when he played a most important part of the public life of his country, we have least information to go upon" (78). We laugh at the biographer's obsequious insistence that the lack of "trustworthy record" (78) is regrettable; we laugh as

the narrator's assertions double as Woolf's backhanded denial that this lack is at all regrettable. The ironic completeness with which the biographer manages to fill in details about Orlando's stay in Constantinople by "speculat[ing], surmis[ing], and even mak[ing] use of the imagination" (78) confirms that the absence of records has no significance to the biographer's task whatsoever. The biographer fills 12 pages with detail about all the things that, perhaps, made up Orlando's life in Constantinople. She/he makes use of the imagination, which Woolf's sarcastic tone assures us is not shocking at all.

As if to reiterate her point that a writer is a mere maker of suggestions, a reader with a pen whom other readers are smart to trust no more than they trust themselves, Woolf fills her biography with comic reading errors. The biographer, for instance, misreads the waxworks at the Abbey. With this misreading, Woolf tricks readers into laughing out of existence any remainders of the conception that real is a tangible or worthwhile event that a biographer or anyone else could present. Describing the likelihood that the Queen will be able to understand much of Orlando's character by observing only his head, Woolf writes, ". . . surely a head can be . . . fertile, looked down upon from a chair of state by a lady whose eyes were always, if the waxworks at the Abbey are to be trusted, wide open" (13). Here the biographer misreads, or tries to pass off, a static representation of reality (waxworks) for reality itself, tries to say that the queen's ever-opened wax eyelids tell us the queen is always alert. You can't do that we want to yell,

laughing and horrified at the same time. It strikes us as impious in the extreme to use a static representation of reality, to justify an assessment of the queen's powers of observation. We readers deny a mere rendition of the queen the authority of the real thing. It is even more impious to use a representation of reality (the waxworks) to explain another representation of reality (the metaphor "she always has her eyes opened.") Metaphors may be useful for explaining reality, but how could anyone justify using a metaphor to explain another metaphor? What would be the point?

Once we valorize real over artifice, however, we are challenged to come up with a definition of real that the biographer should have used. This, of course, is impossible. If we reject a wax rendition as limited by the medium and perspective through which it comes to us, we also have to reject a linguistic rendition, either written or spoken, as limited by the medium and perspective through which <u>it</u> comes to us. By goading readers into trying to define real, Woolf discredits arguments that real exists at all. It is as inadequate, we are tricked into admitting, to assess the queen's powers of observation by the elevation of her eyelids in a wax figure, as it is to assess the queen's powers of observation by a description of her qualities from a history book. And whenever we use a metaphor to explain what we are accepting as a truth, we are always unwittingly using a metaphor to explain another metaphor. There is no truth beyond metaphor to find.

Woolf's mixed up biographer, unable to differentiate between

a real person and a rendition of a real person, and inappropriately, we think, using metaphor, serves a second purpose. The biographer makes us doubt his/her trustworthiness. If she/he will try to pass off metaphor as a reality, what other slick moves might she/he try to make? Our biographer is a reader as we are, not above mistakes at least, and probably fabrication and downright lies as well.

Those in Orlando who do profess to be certain about anything are derided as clowns. The doctors who try to explain what is wrong with Orlando posture themselves as certain about their prognoses even though the evidence they present to support their claims is obvious speculation. Their position is the inverse of that of the biographer, who professes not to know anything for certain, but is willing to present infinite speculation in order to fulfil his/her duty as biographer. The doctors present all of their various speculations, one after another, as serial certainties. Woolf writes:

> But the doctors were hardly wiser then than they are now, and after prescribing rest and exercise, starvation and nourishment, society and solitude, that he should lie in bed all day and ride forty miles between lunch and dinner, together with the usual sedatives and irritants, diversified as the fancy took them, with possets of newt's slobber on rising, and draughts of peacock's gall on going to bed, they left him to himself, and gave it as their opinion that he had been asleep for a week. (43)

On the few occasions that the biographer claims to rely on certainty and not on "perhaps," Woolf leaves out details or gives us blank space, asserting, literally, that nothing is certain. Woolf writes, hyperbolically: "though their acquaintance had been so short, they had guessed, as always happens between lovers,

everything of any importance about each other in two seconds at the utmost" (164). And twice in the section in which Orlando meets and weds Shelmerdine, Woolf leaves blank space, as if to prove that what goes on between the lovers is explained as well by telling the reader to guess as it would be if it were transformed into words.

In short, Woolf makes fun of everything, deriding anyone postured as certain about anything. In particular, she undermines accepted linkages between biography and certainty and truth. But this perhaps-biography I could call it, tells truths about Vita that might not have room to exist in ordinary biography. Vita was contradictory. She loved her husband Harold but also had a "perverted nature" in her own words (34) by which she meant that she loved women and that fidelity was an impossibility for her. Vita says that Harold was "unalterable, perennial and best" (34). But she also says that she was never happier than when she lived in Paris with Violet Trefusis, cross-dressing to pass as Violet's husband. Vita wrote "I never appreciated anything so much as living like that with my tongue perpetually in my cheek, and in defiance of every policeman I passed" (116).

Vita's tragedies were comic--she wrote of the absurdity of being given "communicating [hotel] rooms" with her hated rival for Violet (Violet's husband Denys) "while [Violet] was a little way off" (122). And what might have been a dignified chronicle of an aristocratic genealogy is contorted into irony by absurd inheritance laws based on gender. Vita grew up at Knole, her

beloved castle, only because her mother could prove that she and her brothers were illegitimate, thereby passing Knole to Vita's father instead of to her uncle. And because Vita was a woman, albeit one for whom playing at being a man was a central theme, the courts would not recognize her as a legitimate heir to Knole. Instead they recognized her cousin, a man yes, but being gay himself, he is unlikely to have been any more conventionally proper an heir than Vita would have been.

While an ordinary biography is likely to have to position Vita as man or woman, tragic or comic, Woolf's mock biography, more uncertain than it is certain, more hyperbolic than it is realistic, the story of a man/woman's four hundred years full of gender changes, cross-dressing, lovers of both sex, and a court case to determine her sex, tells broad diverse tragi-comic truths about Vita that more ordinary biography might have been incapable of embracing. And Orlando is an excellent example of mock biography to use in literature classes concerned with analyzing literary genres.